

Injured birds of prey have place on refuge

by Liz Jozwiak

The Kenai Refuge is one of a handful of National Wildlife Refuges that has had an active bird rehabilitation program since the mid-1980s.

Because of the proximity of Refuge Headquarters to the communities of Soldotna and Kenai, residents have a place to take injured birds. Even off refuge lands, as part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service we are responsible for protecting all migratory non-game birds under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Most other Refuges do not have a federally licensed bird rehabilitator on their staff, or a wildlife veterinarian in town willing to donate his or her time to treat wildlife.

Here on the Kenai, we are lucky to have both.

With the help of various refuge biologists, technicians, local veterinarians and several trained and extremely dedicated community volunteers, the Kenai Refuge has handled, treated and/or released back into the wild over 150 sick or injured bald eagles, 45 to 50 hawks and owls, and a fair number of geese, ducks, swans and songbirds.

Over the years we have also had a wide variety of birds stranded on the Kenai Peninsula that needed some R and R. In 2001, for example, a snowy owl was discovered along the coast in North Kenai that we suspect was blown off course during his migration to warmer wintering grounds. A juvenile marbled murrelet was found on an offshore oil platform in Cook Inlet that probably hatched in the rigging during the summer.

Because of staffing and time restraints, we only hold the birds that we receive for a short period of time. Any birds that require long-term care and rehabilitation are transferred to the Bird Treatment and Learning Center in Anchorage, with Era Aviation graciously shipping these birds to Anchorage at no charge.

You may ask why we receive so many injured birds. Most of the bald eagles and great horned owls are due to impacts with vehicles. Bald eagles are hit by vehicles when they feed on roadkills (or moose gut piles) that are close to the highway, and they cannot get airborne quickly enough.

Almost every September, juvenile great horned owls are hit by cars along the Sterling Highway. These

inexperienced young owls are learning to catch small mammals such as voles, and they are attracted to roads because their prey is easier to spot.

Sick birds have had been diagnosed with lead poisoning either by feeding on an animal or fish with lead pellets or lead fishing weights. Other recent patients have been ill from eating contaminated garbage. Many birds also are injured in the summer when they get entangled in discarded monofilament fishing line.

Encounters with powerlines (either by collisions or electrocutions) have been another source of injuries to birds on the Kenai Peninsula.

A northern boreal owl collided with an electrical transmission line a few years ago and dislocated its shoulder. A juvenile osprey that was electrocuted and had all his feathers burnt off actually survived and was successfully rehabilitated.

Most other raptors that are electrocuted are not nearly so lucky because electrocutions are almost always fatal.

We are pleased to announce that we now have a new improved flight pen to house winged patients. Our new flight pen has been under construction for the last two summers by Boy Scout Troop 152, as Robert Doty's Eagle Scout Project. Congratulations, Robert, on its completion!

The rehab pen was built near the Refuge headquarters and can house two eagles or hawks at the same time.

The pen also can be expanded as an exercise flight pen for birds about to be released back into the wild.

Our bird rehabilitation program has been an ongoing success for many years because of the dedication of the many refuge staffers who at one time or another have responded to injured bird calls, often at strange hours.

Also critical for success are the various state agencies which help respond to injured bird calls, including the Fish and Wildlife Protection Officers of the Alaska State Troopers, Alaska State Park Rangers, as well as our two locally licensed bird rehabilitators, Cindy Sherlock and Marianne Clark, and veterinarians Bart and Sandy Richards of Richards Veterinary Clinic.

Elizabeth Jozwiak is a wildlife biologist and a li-

censed bird rehabilitator who heads up the Rehabilitation Program at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquar-

ters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.